

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Rainy River Lives: Stories Told by Maggie Wilson. By Maggie Wilson.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8r2194cj>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 33(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Cavanaugh, Michael B.

Publication Date

2009-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

members today don't really understand the practices of their ancestors on these points. He's not entirely right and thereby overstates his argument about the rise of tribes and the decline of families. Some tribal judges do appeal to prior law, and some tribal codes do explicitly account for family rights to fishing stations and embed ideas of family rights throughout. The Coast Salish family system remains alive despite colonization and the results of litigation.

Other chapters include Arthur Ray's thoughtful analysis of the problems faced by Canadian experts in giving testimony in Aboriginal cases and the problems for judges who, encountering a battery of opposing experts, would need to have "a level of ethnohistorical understanding . . . equivalent to that of an advanced graduate student" (291). Ravi de Costa gives a useful, although already slightly dated, account of the treaty process in British Columbia, commenting on difficulties arising from differences within communities, and Robert Anderson focuses on water-rights settlements and other issues in the United States that are "treaty substitutes in the modern era" (321).

Bruce Granville Miller

University of British Columbia

Rainy River Lives: Stories Told by Maggie Wilson. By Maggie Wilson. Compiled, edited, and with an introduction by Sally Cole. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 232 pages. \$35.00 paper.

Nearly fifteen years ago Sally Cole, a professor of anthropology at Concordia University, unexpectedly uncovered a collection of handwritten letters while researching for a book she intended to write on the life and work of famed anthropologist Ruth Landes (1908–91). The sender of the letters was Maggie Wilson (1879–1940), a traditional Ojibwe storyteller and chief consultant to Landes between the years 1932 and 1936. It was during those years that Landes lived among the Ojibwe on the Manitou Rapids Reserve. The reserve is but one place of many located along the Rainy River, which courses its way along the border between Ontario and Minnesota.

The Rainy River is the heartbeat of the long and storied history of the Ojibwe people who have populated its shores from time immemorial. It was the people, and more specifically Wilson, who would inspire Landes to write several books including *Ojibwa Sociology* (1937) and the landmark work *The Ojibwa Woman* (1938), one of the first studies about gender of its kind. Their collaboration provided endless insight into Ojibwe culture. However, although these books made their mark on history, the letters Wilson wrote to Landes after their time together contain countless stories that were lost for the better part of a century. Doubtless, without Cole's serendipitous moment deep in the archives at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., nary a word would have ever passed about the letters and the hitherto unpublished Ojibwe storyteller, Maggie Wilson.

Although the story behind how *Rainy River Lives* came to fruition is complicated, the long-lost collection of stories that dwell within its bindings are pure,

and the air of Wilson's heritage can be felt on every page. Cole compiled and edited the stories in a way that maintained both their anthropological value and, perhaps more importantly, their link to a revered storytelling tradition. Her minimalist touch maintained the voice, style, and lessons that Wilson intended to impart to her reader. There are no lengthy explanatory notes or analyses that muddle the readers' interpretation of the stories. Instead, there is merely a glossary of Ojibwe terms, an introduction, and a chronology that sets the stage for the stories to come. Much in line with traditional Ojibwe storytelling, the readers are left to draw their own conclusions from the story. This is supported by noted Ojibwe scholar and linguist Basil Johnston who surmised in the preface of *Ojibway Heritage* that, "The stories recorded are not to be interpreted literally; but freely, yet rationally according to the Ojibway views of life. Readers and listeners are expected to draw their own inferences, conclusions, and meanings according to their intellectual capacities" (1990, 8). It is in this light that Wilson's stories are a mechanism for understanding and educating people to the Ojibwe views of life.

Storytelling has always been a means of transference in Ojibwe society. Wilson's stories are stunning examples of Ojibwe oral literature. Cole aptly captures this in her introduction when describing the purpose of stories in Ojibwe society: "Stories educate about the past and the present, inspire the future, and entertained during the long winter nights" (xxx). Wilson's stories provide rich insight into social organization, spiritual rites, and, more specifically, gender roles in Ojibwe society. However, more than that they are powerful examples of survival and the daily interactions of Ojibwe people. The stories are passed on, and in that way the lessons within are timeless.

However timeless the lessons of Wilson's stories may be, they are also reflective of a specific time in America's history, a time of tremendous upheaval and change that occurred at the turn of the twentieth century across Indian country. She discusses these changes by documenting the lives of her people on the Rainy River through story. At the center of her stories one finds the center of Ojibwe culture: family. Delving deeper into that center her stories reflect the important role women played in the Ojibwe family. Her stories depict the strength of Ojibwe women. However romanticized men were, women—like men—were self-sufficient, resourceful, and immensely involved in doing whatever was necessary to ensure their families' survival. Throughout the stories, Wilson's characters provided insight into the depths and reaches of female efforts to survive, love, educate, and extend their families regardless of the circumstance. Oftentimes the plots of her stories describe women who overcome lazy husbands, abandonment, death, abuse, and starvation. Her stories reveal the complexities of living in an ever-changing world and provide a space to appreciate and respect the Ojibwe woman. Her characters and stories catalog the adverse effects of colonialism and forced assimilation while marking the strength and perseverance of Ojibwe society.

Wilson provides a rare emic account of the maintenance of the Rainy River Ojibwe culture in the face of European institutions of change. Through story she relates the violence that came with the Europeans and spread among her people, along with the horrors of infectious disease and alcohol abuse. Despite

the clear social disruption that European colonialism had on the Ojibwe family, the core faculties of the family and culture remained sound. The palpable lessons of love and spiritual renewal evoked from her stories reflect a vast sense of community and kinship among the people of Rainy River. Many stories illustrate the efforts taken to protect the sick, elderly, and young. She further elaborates on the practice of adoption as it is also seen in most of the stories and sheds light on an extended familial structure that demonstrates the extent to which the traditions of Ojibwe culture are maintained.

In this collection of thirty stories nearly every one opens with some version of "This is the story of an Indian woman." The body of each story takes the reader inside the everyday life of an Ojibwe living near the Rainy River at the turn of the twentieth century. Whether describing the collection of wild rice in the fall, battles with the Sioux, the marriage of two lovers, the power of dreams, or the wisdom of the animals, Wilson's everyday interactions and experiences created stories. Her knowledge and creativity educates the audience on almost every aspect of Ojibwe culture while empowering Ojibwe women. Her stories, although providing a detailed snapshot of time, in the end accomplish much more. They are means by which to transmit the autonomy and power of Ojibwe women through story. Simply put, stories survive for centuries not because they are written but because they are told. Wilson's stories remain a resource for Ojibwe women because they are now told.

In the words of Cole, "Storytelling became the foundation of women's efforts to pass on cultural values and knowledge to their children and to maintain continuity in the face of social rupture" (xxx). With her words, Wilson conjures up what a moccasin game or snake stick game looks like. She describes *jisukan*, or the shaking tent, and describes its power as a medium of transcendence. Spiritual knowledge that Wilson calls *manitokaso* is layered throughout the text. Quite simply, she is an educator. The stories found within *Rainy River Lives* may or may not reflect Western conceptions of fact, reality, or time. However, there is no doubt that the stories reflect an ancient tradition not infatuated with fact, reality, or time but that instead is infatuated with people. Their lives, experiences, and stories are a way to maintain the social fabric of Ojibwe culture. There is a fluidity to Wilson's stories that unites the past to the present and no doubt connects those that still live on the banks of the Rainy River.

Michael B. Cavanaugh

University of California, Los Angeles

Restoring the Chain of Friendship: British Policy and the Indians of the Great Lakes, 1783–1815. By Timothy D. Willig. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 374 pages. \$50.00 cloth.

Following in the scholarly footsteps of British Indian policy studies like Colin Calloway's *Crown and Calumet: British-Indian Relations, 1783–1815* (1987), Timothy Willig's *Restoring the Chain of Friendship: British Policy and the Indians of the Great Lakes, 1783–1815* contributes significantly to our understanding of